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Olivier Harenda
Nicolaus Copernicus University

THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR(SHIP)—FILMMAKERS IN CRISIS

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Introduction

There is a wide variety of different associations which people have in their minds after hearing the word *authorship*. Some may associate the term specifically with literary writers, whereas in most cases, the concept is treated rather holistically: it denotes "the creator of a work of art," as defined by *Oxford Online Dictionary* (www.oxforddictionaries.com). In addition, *Cambridge Dictionaries Online* even narrows down this description to "the state or fact of being the person who wrote a particular book, article, play, etc." (http://dictionary.cambridge.org). Significantly, on the basis of these two definitions, we can infer that *authorship* means the creator himself or herself, the independent and unique *author*. However, how the process of creating one's work is structured?

It comes as no surprise that the author has an explicit concept which he or she wants to convey in their creation. Yet, in the world of today, we are surrounded by multiple collaborative efforts, mirages of reproductions, and numerous litigations about copyright ownership. The modern *auteur* is endangered with the threat of losing their status as "the creator of a work of art" (www.oxforddictionaries.com) due to the interference of third parties, who constitute the collective and industrial process of delivering the final product. In view of such a situation, how can the creator retain their righteous status?

As much as it is visible in all spheres of popular culture, the herein article attempts to examine the issues of authorship in the filmmaking process.

In order to conduct this analysis, the definition of the auteur theory and its understanding in contemporary times is firstly provided. In addition to this, this theory is referred to, and juxtaposed with, the assumptions behind the essay entitled "The Death of the Author" by Roland Barthes. Then, the clash between these theories is explored on the basis of two cinematic texts focusing on the fictional filmmakers who find themselves in *authorial crisis*. In consequence, the importance of the creator of a given work is analysed.

Auteur Theory

Historically speaking, the term *auteur* itself derives from critical works of the first half of the 20th century. It initially emerged in Germany with an innovative concept of "Autorenfilm" (Hayward 20). It is this idea that encouraged screenwriters to claim copyrights for the movies they wrote. Nevertheless, they did not intend to be granted royalties for the scripts only, but for the entire motion pictures because these stemmed from their ideas. As it is put in the work called *Cinema Studies: Key Concepts*, "the film was to be judged as the work of the author rather than the person responsible for directing it" (Eisner 1969: 39 in Hayward 2000: 20).

In France, on the other hand, the dilemma of "who's the auteur" (Stachówna 2006: 15) was less drastic because in many cases the director and the writer of a motion picture were one and the same; or, if not, they closely collaborated with each other (comprising *a joint auteur* in this way). However, the debate on this issue was initiated again in the 1950s, this time by the famous film director François Truffaut in his essay *Une certaine tendance du cinema*, which coincided with the advent of the French New Wave. Afterwards, the *Cahiers du cinema* group began reinventing the theory of *the auteur* with relation to Hollywood productions. The American way of making motion pictures was so different from the European one that it led the critics to include in the theory the concept of *mise-en-scène*, that is to say, all visual aspects of a play or a film that are under the control of the director. The *Cahiers* admitted that the Hollywood style

of movie-making is so industrialised that directors have absolutely no control over the production process; yet, they can still be considered as auteurs due to the unique ways their movies are composed. In other words, it is all based on the director's visual style that forms their personal signature on the motion picture (Hayward 21).

Moreover, it was the American critic Andrew Sarris who technically coined the term *auteur theory*, as a result of mistranslation (http://alexwinter.com). Sarris claimed that one can only become an auteur after achieving technical excellence in the craft, an adequate understanding of cinema, and developing personal style in terms of the look and feel of the movie (Hayward 22, http://alexwinter.com).

Whereas French critics positioned the director as the central producer of meaning, the structuralists placed the auteur as not the exclusive, but one out of many (linguistic, social, and institutional) producers of meaning. The auteur ceased to be unique and became one of the *equal* factors in film production (like the studio which green-lighted the picture or the stars who have played in it). This transformation in turn was taken another stage further with post-structuralism and Louis Althusser's ISAs (Ideological State Apparatuses), according to which the spectator is not just a passive viewer of a movie, but an active *deconstructor* of its meaning on the basis of his or her own experience (Hayward 23, 26–27).

Regardless of how many changes the auteur theory has undergone throughout the decades, there is still great uncertainty on whether the motion picture director is indeed the author of their own creation (http://alexwinter.com). In addition to this, another dubious matter that surfaces is the one of auteur-spectator relationship and the production of meaning. To be more specific, who perceives a director's style as authorial? Is it the director or the viewers?

Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author"

Interestingly, the French literary critic Roland Barthes explored the notion of authorship as well as the ambiguous auteur–spectator relation in his 1967 essay entitled "The Death of the Author." Namely, the theorist questioned who is the real author of a text that can be read by another person (such as a film, book, photograph, music, etc.). Even though it seems obvious that the author is a person responsible for a particular piece of work, Barthes rejected the whole notion of authorship. He argued that when a text is created, it is a unified manifestation of different concepts, languages, beliefs, and philosophies. When we read texts, we tend to focus on the author and the meaning conveyed by them in the work (often asking the question: what did the author mean?); however, none of their ideas are their own. The author is convinced that the ideas derive from their mind, but, in fact, the author has unconsciously borrowed everything from pre-existing texts that he or she has become aware of. For instance, the director makes a film and is considered its author; however, every method used to create this particular film has come from pre-existing ideas that have now become conjoined into something completely new and unique. Therefore, the conclusion seems quite clear: the author is irrelevant, and the truly important person is the reader of a text. According to the theorist, "the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination" (Barthes 6). Thus, when a text is finalised, its meaning can be interpreted in an infinite number of various ways. We ourselves, people deriving from diverse cultures, time periods, and having different experiences, decide what a text means, hence creating distinct and personal meanings in our minds. To sum up, it is the reader who is primarily responsible for the understanding of a text, whereas the author should not be taken into consideration at all (Barthes 1–6).

Authorship in Practice—Analysis of Fictional Auteurs

Needless to say, there are many real-life figures of cinematic auteurs about whom countless analytical and critical works have been written. For the sake of appropriateness, we may enumerate such exemplary movie directors known for their distinct styles as Orson Welles, John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, Wim Wenders, and David Lynch, among many others. Nevertheless, this article does not aim to focus on authentic personas, but to evaluate the workings of authorship in fictional texts. The reason for assuming such an unconventional approach is the fact that a significant quantity of research has already been carried out in relation to real directors and their achievements; yet, very little attention was devoted to the films which provide a metafictional comment on the state of authorship by presenting fictional filmmakers in their authorial crises. Particularly, there are two films which perfectly balance the issues concerned with the processes of being the auteur and the death of the author. These motion pictures are *Bowfinger* (1999) and *Hollywood Ending* (2000). Their analyses are presented hereunder.

i. Bobby Bowfinger —the Accidental Auteur

Bowfinger is an American comedy film made in 1999 by director Frank Oz (the maker of such critically acclaimed pictures as *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986), *What About Bob?* (1991), and *Death at a Funeral* (2007)) with the script written by the comedian Steve Martin, who also stars in the leading role.

The movie tells the story of Bobby Bowfinger, a penniless, middle-aged, actor-turned-director who wanted to make a movie ever since he was a kid. Now, he finally has the opportunity when his accountant hands in the script entitled *Chubby Rain*. Needless to say, the idiotic title reflects the idiosyncratic Z-grade nature of the picture because it tells the story of aliens coming down in rain drops and invading Earth. However, Bowfinger is so fascinated by the script that he resolves to make it into a movie. He attends the meeting with an important producer to secure the budget, but his offer is turned down.

In turn, he pitifully tries to get the interest of "the most profitable Hollywood actor" (00:10:31), Kit Ramsey (played by Eddie Murphy), but he is kicked out of the celebrity's limousine. Still, the undiscouraged director comes up with a brilliant idea: make the movie with Kit Ramsey, except the actor will not know he is in it...

Naturally, such a kind of idea leads to a comedy of mistakes. Bowfinger explains that Kit will be secretly followed around with a camera and the actors will simply walk up to him to say their lines. In an answer to a friend's question about what Kit's going to say in such surreal situations, the director replies: "What difference does it make? It's an action movie. All he's gotta do is run. He runs away from the aliens, he runs toward the aliens [...] and we don't have to pay him" (00:21:39–00:21:46). Of crucial importance is also the fact that Bowfinger does not tell his cast and crew about his scheme, leading them to believe that Kit has actually agreed to play in the movie, but on his own *peculiar* terms, like, for example, one take per scene with him, or no camera visible because it distracts him. When one actress voices her objections, the director creatively lies that what they are doing is a completely new style of filmmaking, a style called "cinema nouveau" (00:43:16).

In this way, the filmmaker sets his insane idea into motion, literally following Kit Ramsey throughout Beverly Hills and setting up totally unexpected situations with the cast. Surprisingly, after such awkward interactions, Kit becomes so paranoid that he actually starts believing in the false reality of aliens wanting to kill him, which in turn only makes it easier for Bowfinger to lure the actor on the top of the planetarium, make him look up at the "alien antenna" and say the central line of the whole picture: "Gotcha suckers!"

After being exposed by Ramsey's associates and later blackmailing them, Bowfinger finally completes and releases his "work of art." Clearly, one cannot expect a movie called *Chubby Rain* (even if made in a proper way) to be a domestic box-office hit; nevertheless, when the director sits in the theatre at

the premiere of his movie, we may infer from the look of his face that Bowfinger achieved his long-awaited dream—he made a motion picture. What is more, he made a film almost singlehandedly, without any studio/producer interference, avoiding in this manner the industrial process of authorship.

Yet, did the filmmaker become successful after his creation? At the beginning of the movie, the viewers can hear Bowfinger's monologue about FedEx, how receiving letters from this company makes people important and that one day "he will also receive FedEx mail" (00:07:33). Indeed, this foreshadowing becomes real at the end of the movie, when a slightly confused FedEx courier arrives at Bowfinger's house and hands him over a sealed envelope. Its content establishes him as a true filmmaker because *Chubby Rain* was so well received in Taiwan that he received a proposition of shooting a new picture there. In consequence, Bowfinger becomes *the accidental auteur*, enjoying his new status on the set of *Fake Purse Ninjas*.

ii. Val Waxman—the Blind Auteur

Hollywood Ending is also an American comedy film, made in 2002, directed and written by Woody Allen (the director of such prominent motion pictures as *Annie Hall* (1977), *Manhattan* (1979), *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), and *Midnight in Paris* (2011)). It is also worth mentioning that in spite of such a rich filmography, this particular picture is the second time in Allen's career when he decided to focus on the problem of the auteur theory on screen (the first time he did that was in a more literary dimension with *Deconstructing Harry* (1997)).

Hollywood Ending opens with the meeting of film producers in the prosperous Galaxy Pictures Studio. The cinematic moguls discuss the latest script called *The City That Never Sleeps* and potential candidates to direct the picture. Much to everyone's surprise, one of the producers, Ellie, proposes her ex-husband for the part, the *(in)famous* Val Waxman (played by Allen himself). Despite considerable reluctance from the studio executives, they green-light the

project with Waxman at the helm. The director himself, contemporarily forced to direct deodorant commercials in a Canadian blizzard, perceives this picture as his big Hollywood comeback. All the preparations for shooting the movie go smoothly until *day one*, when the director suffers a hysterical paralysis and unexpectedly becomes blind. However, unwilling to lose the chance of a lifetime, Waxman proceeds to direct the picture.

Contrary to *Bowfinger*, in *Hollywood Ending* the viewers are presented with the figure of a burnt-out auteur. That is to say, at the height of his career Val Waxman was a respected perfectionist, yet all of a sudden, he suffered a nervous breakdown and fell from grace. One of the producers states that "he's a raving, incompetent psychotic [...] they should lock him up, throw away the key" (00:01:49), whereas the studio owner goes on to add: "Forget it. We're gonna wind-up $20 million over budget and maybe no picture to boot. [...] I'm not going to take temperamental antics from some 'owteur' genius" (00:12:36) Indeed, Waxman is an auteur in his own right, somewhat anchored to the past, constantly talking about "the good old days" (00:07:04). In addition, he won two Oscars (as Allen in real life) and became "a real artiste" (00:02:37) making flop after flop or not completing pictures at all. However, when he is finally hired by the studio, Waxman enumerates that he would like to:

– shoot the whole film in black and white (an intertextual reference to *Manhattan*),

– employ a Chinese cameraman, because they allegedly get the depth unfamiliar to Americans (00:27:15),

– hire a creative art director (who would build Times Square and Central Park from scratch).

Furthermore, prior to losing his eyesight, Waxman has a conversation with his friends about the nature of being a filmmaker and they point out to him that he "[has] to be both [artist and commercial]. In order to make movies, you have to think about the audience. Otherwise, you`re making movies for yourself, like artistic masturbation" (00:18:29–00:18:36). "I`m a classic narcissist then"

(00:18:42), Waxman cheerfully replies and severely pays for his arrogance.

Again, similarly to the case of *Bowfinger*, the blind director serves as a source for a comedy of mistakes. Blind Waxman faces a lot of difficulty when forced to choose the right colour for the background set, pick appropriate props, or direct actors, which leads to bumping into things or even falling from a height. Nevertheless, in order not to become exposed, he relies on the help of a Chinese translator, his agent, and ex-wife. Only on the basis of their spoken opinions, he is able to more or less direct the film and fool the producers. This unusual tactic strangely works to Waxman's advantage because halfway through the film a press journalist writes down in her diary the following passage:

> To observe Val Waxman directing one would think he has no idea what he`s doing. I wonder if he is one of those cinema geniuses who thrive on chaos, like Fellini. He always seems distracted, he never looks anyone in the eye and must be juggling a million things in his mind at once. It`s easy to see why his reputation is one of an eccentric. (00:52:20–00:52:40)

Needless to say, it is quite surprising to infer that absolutely nobody notices Waxman being blind for the whole time. His spastic pretence, constantly bumping into something, and not looking in the eye are taken as features of *the auteur at work*. Nevertheless, when the director finally regains his vision, he views his completed picture and is absolutely horrified. "This looks like the work of a blind man!" he exclaims and quite rightly so. *The City That Never Sleeps* is negatively reviewed by both the audiences and the critics, becoming a $60 million flop. Val Waxman himself, the auteur, is finished in the business, but at least he managed to rebuild the relationship with his son and ex-wife. Yet, in the concluding scene, Val's agent rushes in with a newspaper, telling him that the French loved the movie and hailed it as the greatest American film in 50 years. Uplifted Waxman immediately leaves for Paris, already scheduled to shoot a love story there. "Oh, thank God the French exist" (01:43:08), he says at the very end. *The blind auteur* becomes appreciated.

Conclusion

On the basis of the two aforementioned motion pictures, we can observe the ambiguous nature of authorship as well as the clash between the notions of the auteur and the death of the author. Recapitulating, what is the importance of the creator of a given work? *Bowfinger* shows us that it is crucial, because even though the titular protagonist relied on luck and sheer coincidence, he set the campy tone of his film that was appreciated in Asia. In the case of *Hollywood Ending*, Val Waxman is shown as an unimportant figure. French viewers were the ones who noticed the value of his picture and if he had not been blind, the film's reception could have been completely different (praised domestically, hated overseas).

All things considered, the nature of authorship does not entirely depend on the director. His control over the production depends on whether or not he is working in collaboration with a film studio, but ultimately it is up to the spectators to decide. Adding to Barthes' way of thinking, they not only construct meaning, but also the auteur.

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Abstract

The article examines the issues of the auteur theory, or, to be more specific, the idea of authorship as being the movie director's sole creative vision of the filmmaking process. The paper firstly focuses on the definition of the auteur theory itself and then the theory addresses the assumptions behind Roland Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author." Next, the contradicting concepts are exemplified in the form of motion pictures that depict two fictional filmmakers struggling with *authorial crisis*. These movies are as follows: *Bowfinger* (1999) and *Hollywood Ending* (2002). The abovementioned comparison is done in order to evaluate how much creative freedom one individual creator is given while making a motion picture and whether indeed their distinct style shines through after the movie is done.